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UNCLAS DOHA 000910

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT OF QATAR AGREES TO LEASE PROPERTY FOR
CONSTRUCTION OF CHURCHES

1. On 10 May, representatives of Christian churches in Qatar signed an agreement at the Foreign Ministry for a 50-year lease on a large piece of property in Doha on which they will erect six churches at their own expense. The churches will pay nominal leases of only a few hundred dollars a year, renewable after 10 years. The property contains one-half million square meters and is located on the southern outskirts of town.

2. The Emir long ago announced his support for this development. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are the only countries in the Gulf that have no church buildings. (Qatar allows Christian worship, but KSA does not.)

3. The central part of the land will be occupied by a "Catholic community center" that can seat some 2000. Italian decorator Renato Casiraghi, advocate for the local Catholic community, says that Catholics form the greatest portion of Christians in Qatar, chiefly poor expatriate workers from the Philippines and South India. The Catholic community already has funds in hand to build its church and hopes to have it finished in 18 months.

4. Occupying the four corners of the Christian cantonment will be: (1) An Anglican church that can also be used by other Protestant denominations; (2) a church to serve 34 miscellaneous Indian Christian sects; (3) a church for Qatar's small but influential Coptic community; and (4) a site for two Orthodox churches, one Greek and one Eastern Rite.

5. The churches cannot have any form of exterior Christian symbolism, such as crosses or crucifixes. (These may be on the interior, however.) Neither can any of the churches have bells.

6. Public announcement of the signing is expected soon after the Emir returns from his current trip to South American and the U.S. (on or about May 20).

UNTERMEYER